

The Case Of The Lake Charles Larceny

Written by Ron Borges

Thursday, 28 February 2008 19:00

When the final bell tolled Julio Gonzalez knew what the outcome would be last Saturday night. Minutes later, after the ring announcer said, "We have a split decision" he knew what the outcome would be, too. Not the same as the one he first thought.

Gonzalez became the latest victim of a boxing tradition – a heist job in a small town - when he "lost" a split decision to 41-year-old former IBF light heavyweight and WBA middleweight champion Reggie Johnson last weekend. Books have been written and movies have been made about the kind of petty theft that went on at the Civic Center in Lake Charles, La. on Feb. 23. Congressional investigations have been launched to look into such matters too but it never seems to change. Petty theft, it seems, is as much a part of boxing as parrying punches.

Fighters are still forced to go into the hometowns, in this case an adopted one not far from Johnson's native Houston, of more well-connected boxers and risk their life and their livelihood only to leave on the morning stagecoach with the wrong letter on their record. In a sport that is dying because our alphabet has too many letters (and hence too many alphabet organizations terrorizing boxing) Gonzalez left Louisiana with an L when he deserved, by all accounts, a W. It is a sad but all too familiar story.

Boxing folks believe they can get away with the kind of split decision loss Gonzalez, the former WBO light heavyweight champion, had to swallow because nobody's really running the sport and few people are paying attention. When the decision was announced the fans who had come to the Civic Center to cheer Johnson's return to the ring after a three year layoff had all heard the rumors circulated by local promoter Edward Lee, Jr. that if Johnson won he might be in line to fight reigning light heavyweight champion Bernard Hopkins right there in Lake Charles.

"There's an effort to make Lake Charles the Little Las Vegas of boxing," Lee said before the fight. Oh, sure. They're thinking of making Mankato, Minn, the Little Monte Carlo of boxing, too.

What nobody told them was that the winning part had already apparently been taken care of. According to sportswriter Scooter Hobbs of the Lake Charles American Press, "Johnson won a controversial split decision...that left a crowd that had been behind Johnson most of the night booing when he was finally announced the winner."

Somehow three judges viewed what several people at ringside and a partisan crowd all say was a night of aggression and often of dominance by Gonzalez and came away with scores so divergent it would be comical were it not tragic for the fighter involved. One judge, Ray Clarey, scored it 116-112 for Gonzalez. Another, Mickey Lofton, scored it the same way but for Johnson. And the third judge, Kenny Saintes, had it 115-113 Johnson by giving the local boy the final round. How one guy has a four point margin for one fighter and another has it the total opposite is difficult to understand in some cases but the crowd apparently got it immediately, which is why they booed their own man out of the ring even though you can't really blame Johnson.

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“We stayed in the same hotel,” Gonzalez, the Huntington Beach, Ca.-based former WBO light heavyweight champion, recalled this week. “I saw him after the fight and he couldn’t pick his head up and look at me. I don’t blame him but this kind of thing affects you 100 per cent. It affects your rankings and your future income.

“This is how I put food on the table for my family. This is the way I live. I could see if it was close rounds, OK, give it to the hometown guy. But this was ridiculous.”

So ridiculous that poor Johnson felt compelled to take the microphone after the fight to calm the crowd and promised to give Gonzalez a rematch. It was a promise, he understood, that would very likely never be fulfilled.

“Before I fight anybody else I’m going to give (Gonzalez) a rematch right here in Lake Charles,” Johnson (44-7-1) said. “Thank you Lake Charles.”

Thank you Micky Lofton and Kenny Saintes. And thanks to their optometrists, who apparently missed something the last time they checked those two guys out. Thanks but no thanks for the “offer,” too.

Johnson came out firing initially, landing to the body and showing the same kind of slick ring generalship he has been known for most of his career. But, predictably, the 41-year-old former champion began to tire early and by the fifth round Gonzalez was carrying the action. Gonzalez seemed to clearly win rounds 5 through 9 according to most ringside observers as well as pressing forward in the final two rounds and making the fight. How he ended up losing 116-112 on one card was beyond explanation unless you understand boxing’s long and all too often sad history.

Julio Gonzalez understood. Although he had never been the victim before of a not-so-petty larceny like this one, he had heard about it and, coincidentally, Johnson had said in the past it had happened to him, most recently in a fight with Antonio Tarver several years ago.

The irony of that was not lost on Gonzalez, who is back in California writing letters of protest to the Louisiana Commission to try and get the result overturned or force someone to order an immediate rematch any place but in Lake Charles.

“I don’t know what happened but I knew right when they said “split decision” I’d get robbed,” Gonzalez said. “I just felt like they already had other fights lined up for him with Hopkins or Glen Johnson so they were just going to go beyond me. They already made plans and they didn’t include Julio Gonzalez. All he needed to do was stay on his feet to the end.

“This stuff is definitely hurting the sport. His fans were there to support him and they booed the decision. He literally left the place running. It’s hard but I have to remember those fans told me I won. I just hope I get an instant rematch.”

History, like two of the judges, is not on Julio Gonzalez’s side however. Some times, when the fight is nationally televised and of grave import to the sport, things can change. Immediate

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rematches can be ordered even if outcomes are seldom reversed.

But when things happen in backwater towns out of the sight of most people time passes and memory fades. Reggie Johnson and guys like him go on to whatever was already planned for them and folks like Julio Gonzalez take another fight for reduced money and try to overcome a letter on their record they didn't deserve.

Gonzalez probably understands this but he's a fighter by trade and inclination so he's writing impassioned letters and hoping someone will do the right thing in a sport that usually doesn't do anything in these kind of situations but hold its nose and avert its eyes to a small crime.

Even Johnson's rematch "offer" was somewhat tainted when he added his willingness to give Gonzalez a rematch "right here in Lake Charles." One can see why he'd feel that way but Gonzalez has little interest in that kind of "opportunity," for obvious reasons.

"Why would I go back and get robbed again in the same place?" Gonzalez said, apparently no advocate of returning to the scene of a crime. "Why go through that again? You can't win a fight much clearer than I won that fight. I completely won the whole 12th round and one of the judges gave it to him. If he hadn't the fight would have been a draw but he gave him a round everybody knew I won.

"When I left the next day I was pretty down. At that time I just felt 'It happens. It's part of boxing.' But once I got home and realized this could really effect my job, I got pissed."

Julio Gonzalez took that emotion and put it to the best use he could. He began writing a letter to the Louisiana Commission protesting the decision and asking that those judges "never work another fight."

The odds of anything coming from that are slim, as apparently were his chances of beating Reggie Johnson in Lake Charles, La., but he's decided to do the same thing from his kitchen table in Huntington Beach that he did at the Civic Center that night in Lake Charles. Julio Gonzalez has decided to fight the good fight.

Now it's up to somebody else to make the right decision. Unfortunately, in boxing that's where the problems usually begin.